The Myth of Persephone

Zeus had three sisters. Hera was his wife and sister. Hestia was the goddess of home and hearth. And his third sister, Demeter, was in charge of the harvest. Her job was very important. If she was upset, the crops could die. So everyone, gods and mortals, worked hard to keep her happy. What made her happy was enjoying the company of her daughter, Persephone.

Persephone was a beautiful young woman, with a smile for everyone. One day, while picking flowers in the fields, Hades, her uncle, the god of the underworld, noticed her. Hades fell in love instantly. Hades was normally a gloomy fellow. Persephone’s beauty had dazzled him. As Persephone picked violets, Hades tore a great rift in the earth and burst through to surprise her. He kidnapped Persephone and hurled his chariot down and down, into the darkest depths of the underworld.

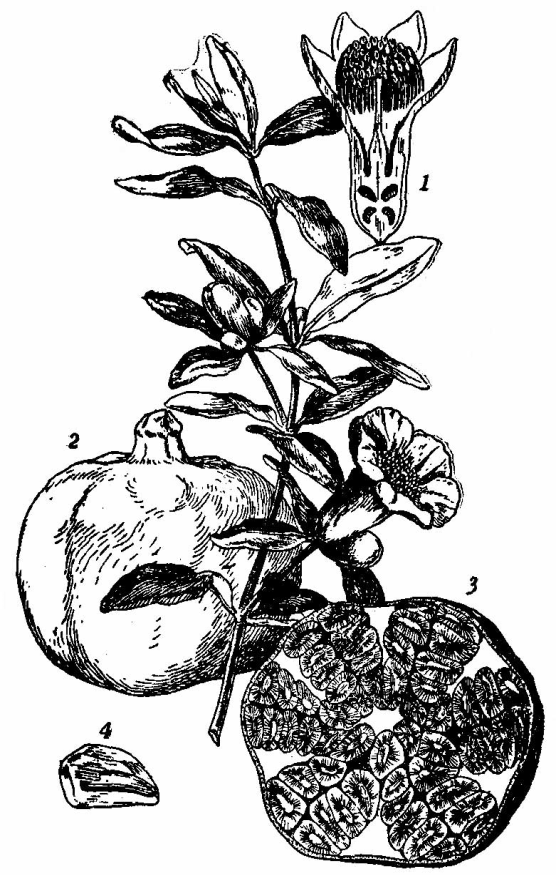
Locked in a room in the Hall of Hades, Persephone cried and cried. She refused to speak to Hades. She most certainly refused to eat. Legend said if you ate anything in Hades, you could never leave. She did not know if the legend was true, but she did not want to risk it in case someone came to rescue her. Nearly a week went by. Finally, unable to bear her hunger, Persephone ate six pomegranate seeds.

It seemed Persephone’s fate was sealed. She would have to live in the Underworld forever.

Meanwhile, back on earth, Zeus was worried about the crops. For days and days Demeter had been searching, scouring the earth for new of her missing daughter, and ignoring her job of keeping the plants green and the crops healthy: now forests, gardens and fields were turning brown, and the crops were withering. The people would die if the crops failed. Then who would worship Zeus? He had to intervene. Finally they asked Helios where Persephone had gone. Helios was the sun god and could see everything and everywhere. He told Zeus and Demeter that Persephone was held captive in the underworld. Demeter was furious and sad, and went into mourning.

Zeus sent Hermes, the messenger, to crack a deal with Hades. When Hermes heard that Persephone had eaten six pomegranate seeds, he had to think quickly. The deal he made with Hades was that Persephone would marry Hades, and live as Queen of the Underworld six months out of each year. However, in the spring, Persephone would return and live on earth for six months of the year.

Persephone agreed. Hades agreed. Zeus agreed. And finally, Demeter agreed.

Each spring, Demeter makes sure all the flowers bloom in welcome when her daughter returns to her. Each fall, when Persephone returns to Hades, Demeter cries and all the crops die, until spring, when the cycle starts again.